

Countries of Particular Concern: Iran

The government of Iran engages in or tolerates systematic, ongoing, and egregious violations of religious freedom, including prolonged detention and executions based primarily or entirely upon the religion of the accused. The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran proclaims Islam, particularly the doctrine of the Twelver (Shi'a) Jaafari School, to be the official religion of the country. It stipulates that all laws and regulations, including the Constitution itself, be based on Islamic criteria. The Head of State, Ayatollah Ali Khamene'i, is the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution and has direct control over the armed forces, the internal security forces, and the judiciary. The Council of Guardians, half of whose members are appointed by the Supreme Leader, reviews all legislation passed by the Majles (parliament) for adherence to Islamic and constitutional principles. The Constitution grants the Council of Guardians the power to screen and disqualify candidates for elective offices based on an ill-defined set of requirements, including candidates' ideological and religious beliefs. In recent years, dozens of prominent liberal Islamic activists and dissidents have been sentenced by the Revolutionary Court to up to 10 years in prison, ostensibly on charges of seeking to overthrow the Islamic system in Iran; others have been arrested and detained for blasphemy and criticizing the nature of the Islamic regime.

Iranian Sunni leaders have reported widespread abuses and restrictions on their religious practice, including detentions and torture of Sunni clerics and bans on Sunni teachings in public schools and Sunni religious literature, even in predominantly Sunni areas. Sunni and Sufi Muslims also report widespread official discrimination. Even Shi'a clerics are affected, as a number of senior Shia religious leaders who have opposed various religious and/or political tenets and practices of the Iranian government have also reportedly been targets of state repression, including house arrest, detention without charge, unfair trials, torture and other forms of ill treatment.

The primacy of Islam and Islamic laws and institutions also adversely affects the rights and status of non-Muslims. While all religious minorities suffer, severe violations are principally directed towards the 300,000 to 350,000 followers of the Baha'i faith in Iran. Baha'is are often viewed as "heretics," and may face repression on the grounds of "apostasy." Government authorities have killed more than 200 Baha'i leaders in Iran since 1979, and more than 10,000 have been dismissed from government and university jobs. Baha'is may not establish houses of worship, schools, or any independent religious associations. In addition, Baha'is are denied government jobs and pensions as well as the right to inherit property, and their marriages and divorces are not recognized. Their cemeteries, holy places, and community properties are often seized and some have been destroyed. Members of the Baha'i faith are not allowed to attend university. Despite some reported improvements in 2000 and 2001, according to the State Department, restrictions on the Baha'i community intensified after the UN Commission on Human Rights ended formal monitoring of the human rights situation in the country in the spring of 2002. Credible sources report that a Baha'i who had been imprisoned from June 1999 to May 2000 and held in solitary

confinement and beaten, was imprisoned again in March 2003 by a judgment of the Revolutionary Court in Mashhad for "taking part in Baha'i activities." Four Baha'is remain in prison on account of their religious beliefs.

The Constitution of Iran formally recognizes Christians, Jews, and Zoroastrians as protected religious minorities who have autonomy over their own matters of personal status (e.g. marriage, divorce, and inheritance) and who may worship freely. However, members of these groups are subject to legal and other forms of official discrimination, particularly in education, government, and the armed services. Over the past 13 years, at least eight evangelical Christians have been killed at the hands of government authorities and between 15-23 are reported missing or "disappeared." According to the UN Special Representative's report, some are said to have been convicted of apostasy. In addition, evangelical Christians in Iran continue to be subject to harassment and close surveillance; many are reported to have fled the country. Jews have been singled out on the basis of their "ties to Israel," whether real or perceived.

The July 2000 conviction of 10 Jews on widely disputed charges of espionage in secret revolutionary (closed) courts that did not afford minimal due process guarantees raised concerns in the international community about the future of the Iranian Jewish community. All have since been released after having served reduced sentences or being pardoned, although in some cases the releases may be conditional. Non-Muslims may not engage in public religious expression and persuasion among Muslims and face restrictions on publishing religious material in Persian.

The government's monopoly on and enforcement of the official interpretation of Islam, as well as other abuses of the right to freedom of religion, negatively affect the fundamental rights of women in Iran, including their right to freedom of movement, association, religion, and freedom from coercion.